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NOTES ON BURNS AND THE POPULAR BALLADS

Burns lived during a period of wide-spread and enthusiastic ballad collecting. Percy's *Reliques* was the first of a series of important works that appeared during his life; four years after the *Reliques*, in 1769, came Herd's first collection, and in 1776 his second, in two volumes. Pinkerton's less valuable work appeared in 1781 and 1783; Ritson added to the list in 1783 and 1784; in the latter year came Caw's *Poetical Museum*, and between 1790 and 1795 five more collections edited by Ritson. Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum* appeared in six volumes between 1787 and 1803, Burns himself being virtually sole editor of II, III, and IV, and having a considerable share in V.¹ All of these works contained texts of the popular ballads.

That Burns himself was acquainted with the ballads his own words make certain. Indeed, had he known none of the collections just referred to, he could hardly have escaped the many chap-book and garland texts which were in circulation, nor have stopped his ears against the ballads that were still current in oral tradition. Without leaving his cottage walls he had one source of information in his wife: "Mrs. Burns," he writes in 1788, ". . . scarcely ever in her life, except the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, and the Psalms of David in metre, spent five minutes together on either prose or verse. I must except from this last a certain late publication of Scots poems, which she has perused very devoutly; and all the ballads in the country."² Moreover, Burns has left explicit record of his acquaintance with several of the collections listed above. For instance, "The ballad on Queen Mary was begun while I was busy with Percy's 'Reliques of English Poetry.'"³ Again, "The old ballad, 'I wish I were where Helen lies,' is silly to contemptibility. My alteration of it, in Johnson's, is not much better. Mr. Pinkerton, in his, what he

¹ Bibliographical information concerning these works is easily accessible in Child's "Sources of the Texts," *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, V, pp. 397 ff.

² Burns to Miss Chalmers, 16 Sept. 1788; *The Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Wm. Scott Douglas; V, p. 157. The "late publication" was probably volume II of the *Museum*.

³ Burns to Dr. Moore, 27 February 1791; Scott Douglas V, p. 349.

calls, ancient ballads (many of them notorious, though beautiful enough forgeries) has the best set. It is full of his own interpolations—but no matter.”⁴ That he knew Herd’s collections, and in addition had access to Herd’s MSS, the editors of the *Centenary Burns* make quite certain.⁵ A casual reference like the following is not without interest in this connection: “I remember a stanza in an old Scottish ballad, which, notwithstanding its rude simplicity, speaks feelingly to the heart:

‘Little did my mother think,
That day she cradled me,
What land I was to travel in,
Or what death I should die.’

Old Scottish songs are, you know, a favorite study and pursuit of mine.”⁶ The following sentence is more significant, because it indicates that despite his habitual use of the word “ballad” to indicate almost any brief verse that could be sung, Burns did distinguish between the narrative poem to which the term might properly be applied, and the lyric which was merely a lyric: “You must, when all is over, have a number of ballads properly so called: ‘Gil Morice,’ ‘Tranent Muir,’ ‘Macpherson’s Farewell,’ ‘Battle of Sheriff-Muir,’ or ‘We Ran and They Ran,’ . . . ‘Hardiknute,’ ‘Barbara Allen.’”⁷ Since Burns’s notes in the interleaved copy of the *Scots Musical Museum* have been accurately transcribed and published,⁸ more definite evidence of his acquaintance with the traditional ballads has been accessible. And that he himself had a share in the ballad collecting which was then general, is proved by the number of versions that found their way through his hands to various editors, and eventually into Child’s edition. The list

⁴ Burns to George Thomson, July 1793; *The Works of Robert Burns*, Globe edition, 532. The ballad referred to, “Fair Helen of Kirkconnel Lea,” is not a traditional ballad. See *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. T. F. Henderson; III, p. 114.

⁵ *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, ed. W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson; III, p. 296. Hereafter referred to as “the *Centenary*,” or “C.B.”

⁶ Burns to Mrs. Dunlop, 25 Jan. 1790; Scott Douglas, V, p. 285. The ballad is “Mary Hamilton,” Child 173-R.

⁷ Burns to Thomson, Sept. 1793; *Globe*, 536. Of the ballads mentioned only the first and last are genuine traditional ballads (Child, 83 and 84).

⁸ *Notes on Scottish Song by Robert Burns*, ed. J. C. Dick, London, 1908. See for instance Burns’s comments on “The Lass of Lochryan” (Child 76) p. 2; “Gil Morice” (83) p. 41; “Hughie Graham” (191) p. 53; “Lord Ronald my Son” (12) p. 56.

is comparatively large: "Lord Randal" (Child 12-F); "Sheath and Knife" (16-C); "The Cruel Mother" (20-B); "Tam Lin" (39-A); "Gude Wallace" (157-C); "Mary Hamilton" (173-R); "Hughie Graham" (191-B); "The Lochmaben Harper" (192-Ab); "Geordie" (209-A); "The Duke of Athole's Nurse" (212-A); "The Braes of Yarrow" (214-P); "Rare Willie Drowned in Yarrow" (215-Ba); "Katherine Jaffray" (221-Ab); "Rob Roy" (225-G); "The Rantin Laddie" (240-Aa); "Get up and Bar the Door" (275-C).⁹

That Burns knew a large number of the popular ballads is obvious. In the notes that follow I have pointed out some instances where these ballads seem to have influenced his verse.¹⁰

A. POPULAR BALLADS RE-TOLD BY BURNS

1. "Lord Gregory" (*C.B.* III, p. 220) is a re-vamping of "The Lass of Roch Royal" (Child 76). (Cited in *C.B.* III, p. 455; see also Angellier, *Robert Burns*, Paris, 1893, II, p. 21.)

2. "Kellyburn Braes" (*C.B.* III, p. 129) is Burns's version of "The Farmer's Curst Wife" (Child 278). (Cited *C.B.* III, p. 392) Burns's refrain is suggestive of those of "The Cruel Brother" (Child 11-A), "Leesome Brand" (15-B), "Sheath and Knife" (16-A) "The Cruel Mother" (20-B), and others of the same class.

B. IMITATIONS OF BALLAD FORMS AND METHODS

1. "The Five Carlins" (*C.B.* II, p. 177), though a political song, is to the tune of "Chevy Chase" (Child 162-B), and is in

⁹ Child's headnotes to the various texts, and the notes in the *Musical Museum*, ed. 1853, give the details of Burns's connection with the ballads listed. Dick, in *The Songs of Robert Burns*, London, 1903, 496, says that Burns contributed a version of "Hind Horn" to Motherwell, but leaves the statement unsubstantiated.

¹⁰ Burns does not seem to have drawn any line between the genuine traditional ballads and those which, like "Sheriff-Muir," for example, were of respectable antiquity, but the work of known individuals. He was, of course, ignorant of the controversial possibilities that the theory of communal composition was before long to open to scholars, and like Sir Walter, considered the ballads to be the work of individuals: "There is a noble sublimity," he writes, "a heart-melting tenderness, in some of the ancient ballads, which show them to be the work of a master hand." (Commonplace Book, Sept., 1784; *Globe*, 297.) For the purposes of this study, however, I have limited myself to those ballads which Child included in his edition.

some minor details of phraseology reminiscent of stock ballad expressions.¹¹

2. "John Barleycorn" (*C.B.* I, p. 243), which Burns calls "a ballad," is in the "Chevy Chase" stanza, and makes use of some snatches of ballad phraseology.

3. "Grim Grizzel" (*C.B.* II, p. 459) was undoubtedly written in jovial imitation of the ballads. The stanza is that of "Chevy Chase"; there are suggestions of the characteristic incremental repetition, and a good many echoes of ballad phraseology.

4. "Elegy on Willie Nicol's Mare" (*C.B.* II, p. 223) shows what might be considered a reminiscence of incremental repetition in the use of the first line of stanza I to form the first line of each of the following stanzas; but the point should not be pressed.

5. "The Fete Champetre" (*C.B.* II, p. 174) shows distinct traces of ballad influence in the first stanza, where the entire form of the stanza—"O, wha will to," etc.,—is almost certainly conscious ballad imitation. There is nothing in the Jacobite song "Killiecrankie," which furnished Burns with his tune, at all parallel with these opening lines.

C. ECHOES OF BALLAD PHRASEOLOGY

1. "The Duchess of Gordon's Reel Dancing" (*C.B.* II, p. 61)
l. 1:

"She kiltit up her kirtle weel."

With this cf. "Tam Lin" (39-A) st. 3:

"Janet has kilted her green kirtle."

(The A-text of the ballad was communicated by Burns to the *Museum*.) See also "Hind Etin" (41-B), st. 2. The expression is a ballad commonplace.

2. "Highland Harry" (*C.B.* III, p. 42), st. 2, l. 1:

"When a' the lave gae to their bed."

The expression derives ultimately from the commonplace "When bells were rung and mass was sung, And a' folk bound to bed."

¹¹ Ritter, *Quellenstudien zu Robert Burns*, Berlin, 1901, p. 240, notes: "Zuweilen verwendet Burns auch stereotype Balladenwendungen in bewusst komischer Absicht; so 'Might nae man him withstand' in *The Five Carlins*; 'Ere to-fa' o' the night' in *John Busby's Lamentations*; 'He looked east he looked west,' 'Now wae betide thee . . . An ill death may ye die' (Grim Grizzel); 'O haud your tongue,' . . . etc., (*The Deuks Dang O'er My Daddie*; vgl. auch *Gat Ye Me*), 'Ah! little kend,' etc. (*Tam o' Shanter*);."

(Cited Ritter, 208) The same may be said of the line in "The Last Braw Bridal": "The bells they rang and the carlins sang."

3. "John Anderson, My Jo" (C.B. III, p. 63) l. 4:
"Your bonie brow was brent."

With this cf. "Lady Elspat" (247) st. 1:
"How brent is your brow."

4. "The Rantin Dog" (C.B. III, p. 70) l. 1:
"O, wha my baby clouts will buy?"

With this cf. "Fair Annie" (68-E) st. 1:
"O wha will bake my bridal bread,
And brew my bridal ale?"

Cf. also "The Lass of Roch Royal" (76-A) st. 18:

"O wha will show my bony foot." (Cited Ritter p. 131).

Passages of a similar nature occur in many of the ballads.

5. "My Hoggie" (C.B. III, p. 14) l. 13:
"When day did daw, and cocks did craw."

With this cf. "The Wife of Usher's Well" (79-A) st. 11:
"The cock doth craw, the day doth daw."

6. "The Bonie Lad that's Far Awa" (C.B. III, p. 94) l. 4:
"O'er the hills and far awa."

The line derives ultimately from "The Elfin Knight" (2-A). But the expression, in various adaptations, is found in a large group of songs which were nearer to Burns's song than was the ballad. See C.B. III, pp. 369 ff.; also Ritter p. 184.

7. "Lady Mary Ann" (C.B. III, p. 126) st. 1:
"O Lady Mary Ann looks o'er the castle wa',
She saw three bonie boys playing at the ba',
The youngest he was the flower amang them a'."

The editors of the *Centenary* point out (III, p. 390) that Burns "got the germ of his song . . . from a fragment in the Herd MS." The second of the three lines is, however, closer to a ballad commonplace than to the fragment from Herd. See for instance "Sir Hugh" (155-A) l. 1:

"Four and twenty bonny boys
Were playing at the ba'."

See also "The Bonnie House o Airlie" (199-B) st. 3:
"The lady looked o'er her own castle wa."

Again, the third line of Burns's stanza is nearer to a line in "The Bonny Earl of Murry" (181-A) than to anything in the Herd song:

" . . . the bonny Earl of Murray
Was the flower amang them a'."

8. "Charlie He's My Darling" (C.B. III, p. 154) st. 3:

"Sae light he's jimped up the stair
And tirl'd at the pin;
And wha sae ready as hersel'
To let the laddie in!"

With this the editors of the *Centenary* point out (III, p. 414) one ballad parallel; see also "Glasgerion" (67-A) st. 10; "The Grey Cock" (248) st. 4; "Auld Matrons" (249) st. 2; and elsewhere.

9. "The Lass that Made the Bed" (C.B. III, p. 162)

a. st. 5: "I laid her 'tween me and the wa'."

With this cf. "King Henry" (32) st. 18; "Captain Wedderburn's Courtship" (46-A,B,) st. I; "Prince Heathen" (104-B) st. 4.

b. st. 7: "She took her mither's holland sheets
An' made them a' in sarks to me."

With this cf. "The Elfin Knight" (2-A) st. 7 and 8; "Jellom Graeme" (90-B) st. I; "Johnie Scot" (99-A) st. 12 and 13. Of course both *a* and *b* may have come to Burns from Scottish song, though the expressions were common in the ballads.

10. "It Was A' for Our Rightfu' King" (C.B. III, p. 182)
a. st. 3: "He turn'd him right and round about."

Burns's expression, though connected in some way with "Mally Stewart" (see C.B. III, p. 435) resembles more closely the phraseology of several ballads. See for instance "Young Hunting" (68-A) st. 16; "Willie and Lady Maisry" (70-B) st. 15; "James Harris" (243-F) st. 3; and elsewhere. The third stanza of this text of "James Harris" is so suggestive of Burns's first and third stanzas that it may well be quoted entire:

"He turned him right and round about
And the tear blinded his ee:
'I wad never hae trodden on Irish ground,
If it had not been for thee.'"

This text of "James Harris" was published in the *Minstrelsy*, 5th edition, 1812 (Child's headnote). Laidlaw had written to Scott concerning the ballad in January 1803. If it was current in this form before Burns wrote his song, it, as well as "Mally Stewart," may have helped shape Burns's lyric. It is quite possible, too, that Scott had the ballad unconsciously in mind when

he wrote the song in "Rokeby" for which the editors of the *Centenary* say he "adopted" Burns' third stanza.

b. st. 5: "When day is gane, and night is come,
And a' folk bound to sleep."

The expression does not appear in "Mally Stewart," but is a modification of the ballad commonplace "When bells were rung," etc. (Cited Ritter p. 208.)

11. "Young Jessie" (C.B. III, p. 226) l. 1:

"True hearted was he, the sad swain o' the Yarrow."

The editors of the *Centenary* say (III, p. 460): "It is probable that Burns refers to the hero of the old ballad *The Dowie Dens of Yarrow*." It should be noted, however, that Burns sent the B-text of "Rare Willie Drowned in Yarrow" (215) to William Tytler in 1790. He may have had either of the two ballads in mind.

12. "O, Let Me in This Ae Night" (C.B. III, p. 274).

The editors of the *Centenary* note: "Founded on a song in Herd's *Collection* (1769) which Burns revised for Johnson's *Museum*. The first stanza and the chorus are borrowed from the Herd set, which is one of many derivatives from a group of black letter ballads." The idea of the song, and to a considerable extent the phraseology of the chorus, may be paralleled in the ballads. Cf. "Erlinton" (8-A) st. 4; "Glasgerion" (67-A) st. 10; "Willie and Lady Maisry" (70-A) st. 7, and others.

Some persons would undoubtedly point out more "parallels" or "adaptations" than I have included in these brief lists; others would strike out some of mine as insignificant. In any case, one comes to the conclusion that Burn's immediate debt to the ballads was slight.

Why the poet, with his well known fondness for re-working old material, should have made so little use of ballads that were ready at hand, it would be profitless to discuss at any length; three suggestions however, may not be out of place. First, Burns had a native preference for lyric over narrative forms; it was an easier and more congenial task to build up a song around an old chorus, than to rewrite a ballad. Second, the fact that other men were already collecting and publishing ballads may have had something to do with Burns's neglect of them. Herd, Pinkerton, and Ritson had already scoured the field. Third, Johnson's plan,

in the *Museum*, was to furnish a complete collection of "Scots Songs" for the use of "admirers of social music."¹² He was as much interested in the publication of tunes as of suitable words for tunes. This interest, which to a larger extent than is usually recognized Burns seems to have shared, made it inevitable that the poet should turn to Scottish song rather than to the ballads. There were ballad tunes to be had, but the song tunes were far more numerous; this fact in itself would have determined the line along which Burns was to work.¹³

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¹² Original preface to Vol. I., *Museum*, ed. Stenhouse, 1853.

¹³ Angellier, commenting on Burns's neglect of the ballads, writes: "Il avait l'âme passionnée, et non romanesque. Il fallait, en tout ce qu'il faisait, qu'il sentît, entre les mains, de la réalité, quelque chose de présent et d'immédiat. Son éducation littéraire s'était formée à regarder la vie et les gens qui l'entouraient. Son génie était fait d'observation, bien plus que d'imagination. Il avait l'esprit net et pratique, il ne l'avait jamais exercé à se transporter dans d'autres temps. Il ne savait pas vivre parmi d'autres hommes que des hommes réels et vivants." (*Robert Burns*; II, p. 19) The existence of "Scots Wha Hae," and of the numerous Jacobite lyrics—to mention only the songs that come first to mind,—makes this explanation inadequate, though there is a general truth in it.